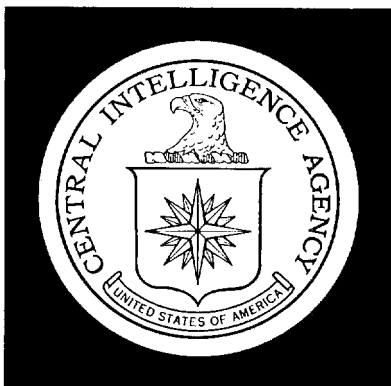


Secret



OFFICE OF
NATIONAL ESTIMATES

MEMORANDUM

*An Alternative Hypothesis
Concerning Communist Intentions in Cambodia*

Secret

5 November 1970

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Approved For Release 2006/09/25 : CIA-RDP79R00967A000300010010-7

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

5 November 1970

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: An Alternative Hypothesis Concerning Communist Intentions
in Cambodia

1. SNIE 57-70, "The Outlook for Cambodia", dated 6 August 1970 concluded that Communist objectives in Cambodia almost certainly included the removal of the Lon Nol regime. But the paper expressed doubt, on the basis of a lengthy examination of military and political factors, that the leaders in Hanoi would think it worth the costs and risks to pursue Lon Nol's overthrow by means of large-scale, all-out military offensives during 1970.

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2. Most of the military and political disadvantages of an all-out attack against Phnom Penh and the Cambodian government which we cited last August remain valid.* Meanwhile, the Communists have shown considerable preoccupation with refurbishing and securing their lines of communication in southern Laos and in extending those lines through northeastern Cambodia to South Vietnam. Communist pressures against the Cambodian Army have eased somewhat; FANK has shown some growth in effectiveness; and allied units are preparing to harass Communist troops in

* These can be summarized as follows:

a. The enterprise would be risky and would involve major difficulties. The Cambodian Army, despite its limitations, would fight with determination to defend fixed positions, particularly Phnom Penh. If Communist forces massed around any target, they might be subject to intense aerial attack and they would have to calculate that the South Vietnamese, and possibly the US, would intervene if the situation appeared critical for Lon Nol. Communist forces would be vulnerable to over-extension, attacks from the rear, and disruption of their lines of supply by mobile ARVN units. An obvious Communist defeat in Cambodia would buoy South Vietnamese morale and further delay or disrupt the efforts to repair the Communist position in South Vietnam.

b. Overthrowing Lon Nol would not solve the more immediate problems. The Communists would probably doubt that success in bringing down Lon Nol would permit them the free use of Sihanoukville, unmolested sanctuary along the border with South Vietnam, or unchallenged use of roads, trails and rivers in northeastern Cambodia. They would expect US bombing and ARVN ground actions to continue in Cambodia whatever "neutralist" flag might fly in Phnom Penh. In the meantime, Communist responsibilities for the administration of the country would have increased, even should it prove possible to utilize much of the present Cambodian structure.

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both southern Laos and eastern Cambodia during the coming dry season. For these reasons, a general consensus among US experts in Washington, Saigon, and Phnom Penh has developed to the effect that an all-out Communist military effort to unseat Lon Nol is hardly more likely after the New Year than before.

3. We agree that this consensus represents the most reasonable view; the Communists may have their hands full during the 1970-71 dry season just holding on against allied pressures throughout Vietnam, southern Laos, and Cambodia. But we think the possibility of large-scale Communist military action in Cambodia to the end of overthrowing the Lon Nol regime deserves continuing and serious attention.

4. We believe this partly on the basis of the effort the Communists now have under way to strengthen their forces in southern Laos and in the COSVN area. We cannot be sure that the substantial augmentation of combat forces in southern Laos has as its purpose only the extension and security of lines of communication. It is possible to envisage circumstances next spring in which several or more regiments could be displaced from southern Laos for operations in Cambodia. We do know that

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COSVN will begin receiving replacements as well as new units direct from North Vietnam after the first of the year; we do not know yet how large the total flow will be or how these troops will be divided as between COSVN units in Cambodia and in South Vietnam.

5. But our real concern over a possible major Communist effort in Cambodia rests less on considerations of capabilities or on intelligence respecting Communist intentions -- the latter is virtually nonexistent -- than it does on an unprovable hypothesis concerning Hanoi's overall view of its situation in the struggle for the unification of Vietnam.

6. The major element in this hypothesis is that Hanoi's confidence in its longer term prospects in the war may have declined and that if this be true, the Communists might be prepared, as they have at times in the past, to take larger

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risks than we have anticipated to redress the situation.* There is some evidence that confidence has in fact declined because of trends in South Vietnam and events in Cambodia. Communist documents and statements by defectors, prisoners, and clandestine sources reflect considerable doubt about the abilities and staying power of the Communist apparatus. By all accounts, the morale of Communist troops and cadres leaves a lot to be desired. Vietnamization is making gains with little effective challenge, the pacification effort is still generally on the track, and ARVN is beginning to show signs of becoming a more effective fighting force.

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- * The 1968 Tet offensive came at a time when most of the major indicators for 1967 -- Communist loss rates, the state of Communist morale, ARVN performance, GVN control in the countryside -- had shown steady progress for the Allied side. It was possible in the fall of 1967 to believe that the Communists had lost the initiative for good, and speculation was rife as to how and when, in the months ahead, the Communists might seek through political and diplomatic means to salvage their position. To the surprise of many, the Communists reacted with what can only be judged as a general military offensive involving fairly high risk. The nature of the risk can best be appreciated if one recalls that Tet very nearly was not a surprise; it could have been a clear military disaster for the Communists if a bit more warning had reached ARVN and MACV. The psychological impact on the Communists in this event would have been most severe.

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7. Developments in Cambodia must have heightened the Communists' apprehensions about their long-term staying power. The availability of sanctuary and bases in that country almost certainly was an essential element in Hanoi's strategy for prolonging the struggle in Indochina until the US withdrew from the war. But the allied move into Cambodia upset such calculations, and in addition raised the possibility of future allied moves into southern Laos. Faced with the changed situation, the Communists may see their long-term prospects in South Vietnam in decidedly bleaker hues, and feel some compulsion to attempt a dramatic move which would reverse the trends, even if it meant taking major risks.

8. In these circumstances, Cambodia might appear as both the most vulnerable and potentially profitable place for a vigorous surprise blow. First and foremost, if Lon Nol were ousted, by whatever route, the Communist leaders might expect it to be interpreted as a major defeat of US policy in Indochina. If so, they would probably expect a resurgence of anti-war and pro-negotiation sentiment in the US. Even if they were not greatly successful in a major Cambodian operation, they might still expect to achieve some psychological gains. Indeed, if US ground forces

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were again utilized in Cambodia, or if US withdrawals from South Vietnam were suspended as a result of Communist attacks, Hanoi might foresee the revival of major anti-war pressures in the US.

9. With national elections coming up in South Vietnam in late 1971, the Communists would be likely to anticipate an increase in peace sentiment there as well. At the outside, Hanoi might calculate that Communist success in Cambodia would set the stage for a major challenge or defeat of Thieu by a "peace" candidate, or perhaps more likely, that Thieu would feel compelled to move brutally to stifle the tide of peace sentiment, creating a more favorable long-term atmosphere for anti-government activity in Saigon.

10. There are other military considerations involved. The Cambodian Army is growing in size and probably will grow in effectiveness. At least, Hanoi cannot assume that it will not do so. A hard blow might set back this process, removing the Cambodian Army as a factor in the Indochina situation, freeing Communist forces for use in South Vietnam, and easing the logistics situation along the South Vietnamese border. Furthermore, the balance of forces is considerably more favorable to the

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Communists in Cambodia than in South Vietnam, and the relatively modest additional personnel requirements of a major military effort there might appeal to Hanoi's policy makers. The strain on Communist capabilities might not be very great, and the adverse consequences of failure would be reduced. Moreover, Hanoi might calculate that to make the effort without a massive buildup would enhance the factor of surprise in the offensive.

11. Finally, Hanoi might see a major effort to unseat the Lon Nol regime as contributing to the Communist diplomatic position. For some time, Communist documents have been replete with specific, though not always consistent, references to the possibility of a ceasefire. If Hanoi's leaders are thinking along such lines, they might consider it necessary to rack up a major military success before making a serious move in this direction.* Indeed, a common theme in Communist documents is the necessity of "forcing" the US to accept a ceasefire on terms favorable to

* In this context, Madame Binh's 17 September "elaboration" in Paris of the Communist negotiation position could be the opening gambit in a new round of the Communist "talk-fight" strategy.

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the Communist position. But Hanoi must have some doubts as to how this can be accomplished as long as the allies hold the battle-field initiative. Thus, Hanoi might have decided that some dramatic move is necessary -- even if the moment is not the most propitious, Communist forces are not perfectly prepared, and there is a risk of a postponement of US troop withdrawals.

12. Balance. We do not know what balance the Communist leaders strike in weighing the disadvantages and advantages of a major effort to overturn the Lon Nol government. We would think that they would prefer to bring this about without a large-scale military push to occupy Phnom Penh, and would prefer to have the Lon Nol regime collapse as a result of Communist pressure bringing about its ouster by tractable Cambodian elements.* This would tend to confuse international perception of the political-diplomatic situation and perhaps, in Hanoi's view, lessen the possibility of direct US intervention or a standdown in US withdrawals from South Vietnam. Thus, Hanoi might believe that its

* SNIE 57-70 pointed out that there was some danger, as the war was prolonged into 1971, that the Cambodian Government might fall as a result of steady communist military and political pressures. While the Cambodians have held up very well to date, the danger of a collapse of will to resist is by no means passed.

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present steady but unspectacular pressures will do the job in time. But if Hanoi does indeed feel pressed for time and sees a need to do something dramatic to counter adverse trends in South Vietnam, more of the same would not seem to be enough.

13. South Vietnam. In the wake of Cambodian developments, Hanoi has probably found itself even more strapped in South Vietnam than was the case in early 1970. The allied incursion into Cambodia has resulted in a marked diminution in Communist military muscle in the southern half of South Vietnam. Recent evidence suggests that some Communist forces have actually been withdrawn from the northern part of the country; and there is considerable evidence that throughout the country some units are being broken down into smaller operating elements and reassigned to lower echelons. At the same time, the cumulative toll of the war and the low rate of infiltration over the past year or so has resulted in a significant decline in overall Communist strength. As a result, Hanoi would have to resort to substantially heavier infiltration into South Vietnam than we have yet seen, merely to rebuild manpower strengths to the levels of a year ago. Moreover, as contrasted with the situation in Cambodia, the allied forces in South Vietnam are large and battle-ready.

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14. On balance, therefore, we believe that anything like a major countrywide offensive in South Vietnam in the near future is not in the cards. The costs merely of getting ready for such an effort appear exceedingly high, and the odds would appear to be against success. Nonetheless, Hanoi may still feel the necessity of attempting some fairly vigorous action in South Vietnam with the forces available, for political impact in the US and South Vietnam. This might be undertaken in conjunction with a major effort in Cambodia, involving a highly selective pattern of action, hitting only a few South Vietnamese targets but attempting to hit them hard.

15. Laos. Although the balance of forces in Laos is at least as favorable to the Communists as in Cambodia, there are several factors which appear likely to limit Communist action in Laos. Successes would not have such impact on the situation in South Vietnam as would equivalent action in Cambodia. Moreover, Hanoi might not want to endanger the equilibrium in Laos -- which has served to give the Communists control of the areas they need to prosecute the war in South Vietnam -- by inviting major allied ground action against the trail network in southern Laos. Also,

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the Communists might not want to derail the ongoing negotiations in Laos by heavy military action. In any event, they appear to have scaled down their forces in the northern sectors while increasing them in the south -- i.e., those areas most closely related to the Cambodian and South Vietnamese theaters. Thus, although we expect stepped-up activity in Laos, particularly in the south, we do not believe that such action will approach a concerted effort to overrun the country.

* * * * *

16. Thus far, we have little evidence that the Communists are gearing up for major offensive actions other than those necessary to enlarge and secure lines of supply and base areas in southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia. Infiltration has picked up substantially in recent weeks, but it is too early to determine how extensive it will be in the months ahead -- and the Communists have a lot of ground to regain, plus three combat theaters requiring men. The push down the trails this year, however, comes earlier and appears larger than in past years. The logistics push also appears likely to be more substantial this year; the Communists have improved the network considerably. In

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addition, Communist forces are being augmented in southern Laos, by infiltration from North Vietnam and by movement of personnel from northern South Vietnam. The presumption is that these forces are to operate in southern Laos, but some of them, as well as forces from South Vietnam, could also be diverted to Cambodia.

17. The points advanced above do not constitute an attempt to estimate that a major Communist offensive to overthrow the Lon Nol government is likely in the near term. The "facts" presently available would not support such an estimate. At the same time, we believe that a case can be made that allied intervention in Cambodia may have increased the pressures on Hanoi to accept greater risks -- in military and/or political actions -- in efforts to improve their situation. If so, major activity in Cambodia, perhaps accompanied by stepped-up -- but selective -- action in South Vietnam may seem the most feasible or worthwhile course to strategists in Hanoi. In sum, the pressures on Hanoi, real and psychological, to attempt decisive blows in Cambodia in hopes of generating a major shock to the allied side, or simply to clear the decks for future operations in South Vietnam, or even to set the stage for a diplomatic demarche, may be considerably greater than the evidence we have so far acquired would suggest.

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Consider as interest paper
for SM 33-70 and
Memo, dtd 5 Nov 70, "An
Alternative Hypothesis Concerning
Communist Intentions in Cambodia"

The attached piece reaches no clear verdict; it is an examination of an hypothesis. We think it is worth some distribution, but in view of its subject matter we will not send it outside the Agency until you approve.

Abbot Smith

5 November 1970

Carrollin paper -

MEMORANDUM FOR:

General Cashman
The Director

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Abbot Smith

*Concur with
the paper -
it is a possibility
to watch out for*

5 November 1970
(DATE)

FORM NO. 101 REPLACES FORM 10-101
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